

**A MARXIST READING OF *LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE* (2017) BY
CELESTE NG**

THESIS

*Submitted as Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement to Obtain
Strata One (S1) Degree*



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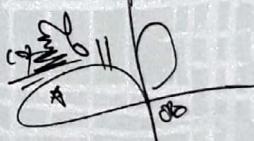
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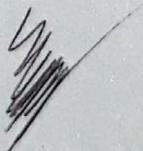
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ABSTRACT

**Dwi Mayang Sagita. 2020. *A Marxist Reading Of Little Fires Everywhere (2017)*
By Celeste Ng.**

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This thesis is an analysis of a novel written by Celeste Ng entitled *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017). This analysis looks at the commodification and alienation that is experienced by women who involved in surrogacy and adoption. This analysis employs Marxist literary theory to explain the phenomena in the novel. The analysis focuses on two issues of commodification and alienation that are proposed by Karl Marx as seen through two female protagonists which are Mia Warren and Bebe Chow. This analysis also depends a lot on the narrator to determine which parts of the novel are used as the data. The result of the study shows that Mia Warren experienced commodification of the human body and four kinds of alienation such as alienation from the product of labor, alienation from the act of production, alienation from the species being, and alienation from other people because she becomes a surrogate mother. The other protagonist, Bebe Chow, also experience four kinds of alienation because her child is adopted.

Key words: *surrogacy, adoption, commodification, alienation*

ABSTRAK

**Dwi Mayang Sagita. 2020. *A Marxist Reading Of Little Fires Everywhere (2017)*
By Celeste Ng.**

Pembimbing: Delvi Wahyuni, S.S., M.A.

Tesis ini adalah analisis dari novel yang ditulis oleh Celeste Ng berjudul *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017). Analisis ini melihat komodifikasi dan alienasi yang dialami oleh wanita yang terlibat dalam surrogacy dan adopsi. Analisis ini menggunakan teori sastra Marxis untuk menjelaskan fenomena dalam novel. Analisis ini berfokus pada dua masalah komodifikasi dan alienasi yang diusulkan oleh Karl Marx sebagaimana terlihat melalui dua protagonis wanita yaitu Mia Warren dan Bebe Chow. Analisis ini juga sangat tergantung pada narator untuk menentukan bagian mana dari novel yang digunakan sebagai data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Mia Warren mengalami komodifikasi tubuh manusia dan empat jenis keterasingan seperti keterasingan dari hasil kerja, keterasingan dari tindakan produksi, keterasingan dari esensi manusia dan keterasingan dari orang lain karena dia menjadi pengganti. ibu. Protagonis lainnya, Bebe Chow, juga mengalami empat jenis pengasingan karena anaknya diadopsi.

Kata kunci: surrogasi, adopsi, komodifikasi, alienasi

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The Researcher

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Having children can be a source of happiness for many people. Unfortunately, some people cannot have their own biological children. Sometimes, the couples who cannot have children biologically receive the unpleasant treatment from their surroundings. Lasker (2016) states that the involvement of childless couples for leading essential positions in family activities such as birthdays, marriages, and other celebrations involving children is excluded by a few societies. As a result, the pressure to have children becomes more intensive for the childless couple. Then, the childless couple will start to find a way to have children. Surrogacy is one of the ways for couples to have a child that is genetically linked with them.

Surrogacy is when a surrogate mother will get pregnant, gestate, and giving birth in a reproductive work agreement between the intending parent and the surrogate mother (United Nation Special, 2018). This method allows people to have a child that is connected with them genetically. Women who become surrogate mother have some reasons. According to Maccalum (2003), 'self-fulfillment;' 'wanted to support anybody else;' 'joy being pregnant;' and 'income' are the reason of women who choose to become a surrogate. Even though there is voluntary surrogacy, most surrogacy is commercial in nature. Fronek (2018) states that in South America, Asia

Europe, and Africa, women who sell their eggs and become surrogate mothers commonly live in poor conditions. This means that the poor condition of a woman makes the economy become the reason that often drives the women to be surrogate mothers. Not all countries in the world allowed surrogacy. For example, the surrogacy through gestational and commercial are allowed in Canada but in the USA, different states have a different rule about surrogacy (Lasker, 2016). The country who has majority muslim also prohibited the surrogacy. According to Lasker (2016), there are sixty two muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, etc, that prohibited surrogacy and the donation of gamete. This shows that to have children through the surrogacy process is not an easy way for a couple who life in the country that prohibited surrogacy.

In contrast to surrogacy, there are also cases when parents give children for adoption. Then, the children will live with a new family. Couples or individuals who want to become parents can also choose adoption. Atwell (1988) said that adoption is a method by which the state seeks to support adequate housing for children whose biological parent cannot give it to them. This means that the child will live with a new family that has a better condition than the biological parent. Some reasons that make the parents lose their parental rights, according to Child Welfare Information Gateway (2017), are child abandonment and psychological illness or parental lack. This shows that not all parents can give a secure life for a child. These factors make

a child end up to an adoption proces to live with a new family that has a stable condition for the child.

Seen from a Marxist perspective, surrogacy can lead the surrogate mothers to experience commodification. In Marxist terms, “commodification refers to the process of assigning market value to goods or services that previously existed outside of the market (Marx 1978)” (Constable, 2009, p.50). It means that, according to Resnik (1998), commodification is a social practice for viewing objects as goods or resources that can be purchased, traded or leased. Women’s bodies can be used as a way to get a child by people in surrogacy. According to Subedi (2015), the surrogate mother is viewed as a tool whose benefit can be turned for money in surrogacy arrangements. It clear that surrogacy can make women experience commodification due to the process when they get paid for their egg, renting their womb, and bear the child. According to Anderson (1990), a woman and a couple who compensate her to relinquish her parental rights over her child treat her rights as a kind of possession right and they view the child as a good that can be purchased. The surrogate mother makes the child become an object in surrogacy. The ties between the surrogate mother and her child that she bears ended when she gives the child up to receive the money from the intending parent. Alienation is also experienced by the surrogate mother in surrogacy. Luk (2010) said that when the product of labor is being separated from the maker is called alienation. This shows that the people who work to produce something will not own the product that they make. In surrogacy, the

surrogate mother cannot claim and has a feeling to the baby as her own because the baby belongs to the commissioning parent after the surrogate gives birth. According to Anderson (1990), her labor is alienated, that she has to repress her personal ties to her own child, and she can be altered to redefine these ties in a downplaying way. This means that the surrogate mother should depress her feeling toward the child and it shows that she is alienated toward her own child.

In the adoption process, alienation also happens toward the birth parent. When the child already in an adoption, the feeling of rejection by adoptive family or their own child can appear to the birth mother. According to Christensen (2017) that said the birth parent in the background can sense the segregation as though they are not important in their child's life while they are watching their child be bathed with affection and support by other people. It is clear that the birth mother can only watch her own child from far away and does not have control toward the child.

The notion of alienation and commodification related to surrogacy and adoption is one of the issues that can be discussed with regards to *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng. There is commodification and alienation that happened toward surrogate and birth mothers in surrogacy and adoption in the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng. This novel shows the life of a woman, Mia Warren, who moves to a new city with her daughter. She lives in a rented house and works in a Chinese restaurant to support her real work as an artist. Her daughter becomes closer to the children of her landlord. After a while, she works at the

landlord's house to clean and cook. One day, one of the landlord's children tells her about a baby girl who was found in a fire station, get adopted by the landlord acquaintance. Mia realizes that the baby girl is the daughter of her friend, Bebe Chow, that works together with her at the Chinese restaurant. Then, she tells her friend about the baby girl. Bebe Chow who really wants to meet her daughter tries to come to the house of a married couple who adopt her child. Unfortunately, the adoptive parent doesn't let her to see her daughter. Bebe Chow starts custody to get her daughter back. At the end, she kidnapped her baby and go to China. Mia's landlord finds out that Mia is the culprit that makes her acquaintance miserable due to the custody of the baby girl. She tries to find out Mia's motive that makes her tells Bebe Chow about the baby girl. Then, she knows that Mia was a surrogate mother for a wealthy couple when Mia was young and she runs away with the baby.

There are two articles that are related to the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng found by the researcher. The first article with the title “Moral Values Found in The Novel Entitled *Little Fires Everywhere*” By Celeste Ng (2019) written by Dian Novita. This article focuses about the moral value in the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017). The article found the moral value by reading the book, make the synopsis, specify the moral values, and detailing the values from books. The writer explains that the novel has some moral values such as motherhood, bravery, love, togetherness, honesty, independence, discipline, wise, and diligence.

The second article is “Narrative Ethics in Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere* (2019)” by Yuan Shen and Wenting Wang. This article focuses on the narrative ethics of the novel such as ethics of the story, ethics of discourse, and ethics of reading. On the ethics of story, the authors elaborate the problem between freedom and responsibility, motherhood and ambition, adolescence and adulthood. In the ethics of discourse, the authors show there is the third person omniscient narration, intertextuality, and spatial narrative in the novel. In the ethics of reading, the authors explore interpretive judgments, ethical and aesthetic judgment. Those two articles and this analysis are different. This analysis focuses to see that the surrogate mother in the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng experienced commodification and alienation in surrogacy and the birth mother in adoption children experienced alienation.

Even though a surrogate mother gestates and gives birth to a child, she cannot claims the child as hers. This is because she must give the baby to the commissioning parent based on the contract in the surrogacy process. The surrogate mother has no legal rights to keep the baby. This situation also happened toward birth mother in the adoption process. Once the birth mother loses her parental right, she cannot claim her baby back. If the surrogate mother or birth mother whose child get adoption takes the baby and runs away, the alienation toward them cannot be stopped because the law sees this action is wrong. This issue also exposed in many literary works. The novel that was written by Celeste Ng entitled *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) is one of the

literary works that exposed this issue. The novel shows the life of a protagonist, Mia Warren, that is experience commodification and alienation in her life because of surrogacy. The novel also shows the life of another protagonist, Bebe Chow, who is experienced alienation because of adoption process toward her child.

1.2 Problem of Study

In order to reveal the issue about the commodification and alienation on mothers in surrogacy and adoption, the research questions are formulated below:

1. How is commodification experienced by a surrogate mother in surrogacy process depicted in *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng?
2. How is alienation experienced by surrogate and birth mothers in surrogacy and adoption processes depicted in *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng?

1.3 Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to see:

1. How commodification experienced by a surrogate mother in surrogacy process is depicted in *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng.
2. How alienation experienced by surrogate and birth mothers in surrogacy and adoption process is depicted in *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This analysis looks at the commodification and alienation experienced by mothers in surrogacy and adoption processes from the novel entitled *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng. This analysis is analyzed with the concept of Marxist theory such as commodification and alienation by Karl Marx. The commodification in this analysis refers to the commodification of the human body that is experienced by the protagonist in a surrogacy process. This analysis also shows that there are four types of alienation such as alienation from the product of labor, alienation from the act of production, alienation from the species being and alienation from other people experienced by both of the protagonists.

Through this analysis, it can be seen that the economic problem becomes the main reason for someone to involve in a surrogacy process. This analysis also shows that women often experienced commodification than men due to the ability on their body in the reproductive part. When a woman is involved in a surrogacy process, she also experienced alienation. The protagonist in this novel has a financial problem that makes her becomes a surrogate mother for a wealthy couple. She experienced commodification because she gets paid for her egg and bears the baby for the intending parent. She also experienced four kinds of alienation. The alienation that is experienced by her makes her alienated toward her own child, repress her own

feeling toward the baby, supervised by the intending parent and her relationship with her family becomes deteriorated. The economic condition can also make someone lose parental rights due to an adoption process. The other protagonist has a baby who gets adopted by other people who has a secure financial condition than her. This situation makes her experienced alienation such as prohibited to meet her own child, she is excluded in the process of adoption, she feels under pressure, and her social relations become unsteady.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that the different financial condition make the commodification and alienation experienced by the protagonists. The financial condition of both protagonists shows that there is different social classes exist in the novel. The literary elements such as characters, setting, and the narrator helps to unfold the events in the novel.

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